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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE  
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THE SITUATION IN LAOS

The Viet Minh in its two-week old offensive in Laos has overrun over half of the northern part of the country and is threatening to capture the two principal cities. It has already set up a puppet Free Laotian Government.

In the military situation, the only position the French seem able to defend is the Plaine des Jarres. Here seven battalions (7,000), part Laotian and part Foreign Legionnaires, are surrounded by 15 Viet Minh battalions (15,000). The French forces are well-entrenched but isolated except for air supply, which is hampered by seasonal bad weather. There are 14 more Viet Minh battalions between the Vietnam border and the Plaine des Jarres.

Some Viet Minh forces are now moving toward Luang Prabang, the royal capital. About 50 miles to the north, two battalions are moving southward to attack the capital. It is expected that the Viet Minh will contain French forces on the Plaine des Jarres and take Luang Prabang, even if it is reinforced. Its fall may occur shortly.

The Viet Minh plunge into Laos has exposed its supply lines and depots in Tonkin to French counteraction. There has been no French effort to exploit this weakness and no indication that such is planned. This may reflect the defensive-mindedness of the French Command which is disturbed over increasing Viet Minh guerrilla operations in the Tonkin delta.

The Communists' military campaign is not expected to penetrate any farther than northern Laos this spring because of heavy rains beginning in about three weeks. They will probably spend the summer preparing for an advance south into Cambodia where dissident guerrillas, already under Viet Minh influence, would join them. From Cambodia, they would later attack the Saigon area.

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The Viet Minh has attempted to present the campaign as the work of native Laotian forces, with the assistance of some Viet Minh volunteers. It has now proclaimed the establishment of a "Free Laos" government, headed by a relative of the Laotian king, and mentioned a Laotian national "assembly."

The Communists apparently are preparing for a prolonged period of political activity in Laos after military operations are halted by bad weather. The establishment of the puppet regime in Laos gives the Communists a much improved position to appeal for a "united front" of the people throughout Indochina.

The developments in Laos have caused great concern in Thailand. The government there has been already worried by the attractions to its peoples of Thai autonomous state in China created by Peiping several months ago. This concern is now aggravated by the possibility that the Viet Minh campaign in Laos is intended to link up with some 50,000 pro-Viet Minh Vietnamese living in the border region of north Thailand. French and Laotian representatives in Bangkok have asked that these Vietnamese be removed to the Thai interior but this seems an almost impossible physical task.

The Thais are disturbed that the West may not sufficiently appreciate the threat to Thailand. Several days ago Premier Phibun told our Ambassador that he regretted that the aggression in Laos had not been set before the UN.

We do not know for sure the reason for the invasion of Laos at this time. It does appear to have been an operation that had been long planned and to be a natural outgrowth of the successful Viet Minh operations of last winter in western Tonkin. It does not appear to be connected with the Soviet peace offensive, and may in fact be evidence that Moscow by no means completely controls developments in Southeast Asia.

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[REDACTED] Here again evidence is lacking, but it is reasonable to assume that the Chinese Communists exercise great influence over the Viet Minh. The French Commander in Indochina has noted that Chinese aid to the Viet Minh in recent weeks has more than doubled, and it is believed that Chinese Communists for a long time have been providing strategic advice.

At present, however, there is no evidence that the Viet Minh offensive is a prelude to a Chinese Communist invasion of Southeast Asia.

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